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ABSTRACT

An overview of market research is provided, with advice about conducting market research for the educator. Market research is any kind of research that gives information about the current state of the market and offers guidance in improving one's position in that market. The relative advantages of conducting market research by oneself or by hiring others to do it are explored. The roles of qualitative and quantitative research are compared. Specifics are given for the areas of sampling, questionnaire design, and the conduction of surveys. Since quality control of data in market research is essential, data collection, handling, and analysis are reviewed. Planning at the outset and implementation of results at the end are critical to the success of market research. The more detailed the plan, the more likely the results will be usable and achieved at an acceptable cost. (SLD)

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Market Research

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> Know what you want, then resist impulses to add 'just a little more'.

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WHAT IS MARKET RESEARCH?

It is any kind of research that gives you information about the current state of your particular market and offers guidance in improving your position in that market.

In most cases, it will involve opinion research, employing scientific sampling and interviews or written questionnaires. Educational institutions most often use market research as a way to (1) increase the effectiveness of their fund-raising efforts, or (2) attract more (or better) students.

Even image studies or projects that are overtly intended to solve some immediate problem usually have money or students as their final goal. State and public institutions may direct their fund-raising efforts—and related market research— at legislators, rather than private sources.

Whatever the goal, market research can help you reach it—providing you follow certain rules. The first is to define the goal very clearly at the outset. A clear definition will help you keep the project on track from beginning to end. It will assure that the appropriate groups are sampled; that the right questions are asked; and, finally, that results are analyzed and interpreted in the most productive way.

Careful planning on your part can also help to keep costs to a minimum. Know what you want, then resist impulses to add "just a little more." Add-ons lead to cost overruns— usually big ones. Almost everyone adds on in the course of a study and then is shocked by how far the final cost soared above the original estimate.

SHOULD YOU DO IT YOURSELF?

There are two basic ways to conduct market research. You can do it yourself, or you can hire someone to do it for you.

Doing it yourself has several advantages. After all, who knows more than you about your institution's problems and needs? You can call on in-house expertise: marketing professors; statisticians; your own computer center; the graphics, copy, and printing departments in your PR and publications offices; secretarial and clerical staff; and so on. In-house research should be significantly less expensive.

On balance, though, all of these are offset by some major disadvantages. An in-house study often lacks credibility. People both on and off your campus tend to be skeptical about the objectivity of a survey created and analyzed by staff members who may have a vested interest in the outcome.

The in-house team is not likely to view the institution with the detachment you could expect from outsiders. Not being able to see the forest for the trees, the insiders may write questionnaires that do not address the real issues, or, even worse, that serve mainly internal political purposes. Also, inexperience may lead an in-house team to waste much time and effort debating such things as format and wording of questions.

An outside professional firm brings credibility, expertise, experience, and objectivity to the project. But it does so at a price—a high price in most cases.

A compromise arrangement, combining outside expertise and inside cost-cutting services, is possible. The outsiders can be used for such sensitive jobs as sample selection, questionnaire development, and analysis and reporting. The institution provides computer services, printing and mailing, secretarial and clerical services, etc. This can provide professional expertise and credibility at a reduced cost.

EXPLORE SECONDARY SOURCES

Once you have defined the problem and decided that a market research study is indicated, you must find the most effective way to go about your study. Before embarking on expensive primary survey research, though, you should explore all secondary sources for the required information. This kind of research often saves time and money. At the very least, it can help you write a more productive questionnaire.

Secondary information sources fall into two categories: external sources and sources internal to your organization. You may find valuable data that has been collected on an earlier survey, or information that was collected routinely from students or donors. You should explore all internal sources; they will be by far the least expensive.

If internal sources prove unproductive, begin checking external secondary sources. Academic, trade, and professional journals are logical starting places. The federal government is also a rich source of information: the Department of Education, the Department of Commerce (*Business Conditions Digest*, *Survey of Current Business*), the Department of Labor, and the Census Bureau are four key ones.

Another useful source is the *Lockheed Dialog* data base system, which is a computer-based reference library of scientific, trade, general interest, and governmental publications searchable by keyword. The results of many surveys conducted by or for the government are in the public domain. *The Findex* index of market research cross references most of this information.

Suppose, for example, that you wanted to target the most likely geographic areas for sources of new students. The Census Bureau makes available census demographic information consolidated by zip code. Your applicants for the past two or three years could be overlaid on each zip code. Your computer could then determine statistically the characteristics of the type of zip codes that were the best producers of applicants. Those and all "similar" zips should then be your most productive potential student sources.

ROLE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

If the information you require is not available from secondary sources, then you'll need some type of primary survey research. Primary research can be subdivided into two major categories: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research yields numerical results of some type—counts, intensity, penetration, etc. Qualitative research yields information that is "softer" and is usually not numerical.

Qualitative research is employed most often as the first phase of a projectable, quantitative research project. The purpose of qualitative research is to set the agenda for the subsequent quantitative research.

The most widely employed qualitative technique is focus group research. Focus group research consists of a structured discussion led by a trained moderator in a conference room setting with five to 12 members of the target universe.

The purpose of a focus group is to elicit from the target universe members their perceptions of the issues germane to the research question. Often, the organization generating the research project has preconceptions about the issues that the research should cover. The key issues within the marketplace, however, may be entirely different.

Suppose, for example, that student applications at institution A showed a significant drop from the previous year and that during the same period the economy experienced a slowdown. A survey at this time would very likely tend to emphasize economic issues and price sensitivity. A few focus group sessions, however, might reveal that, while the economy was a concern, parents and students were looking for a more career-oriented curriculum than institution A offered. Carefully conducted focus group research will help ensure that the quantitative survey research covers all the key issues.

Another important use of the focus group environment is to pretest a questionnaire for use in subsequent quantitative survey research. Walking through

“Quantitative research yields numerical results of some type—counts, intensity, penetration, etc. Qualitative research yields information that is “softer” and is usually not numerical.”

a questionnaire with five to 12 members of the universe that will receive the survey can prevent expensive errors. It will ensure that everyone understands the questions, that the questions are not ambiguous, and that jumps and skips from one question to another can be followed. And, because fixed-choice questions should be used as much as possible (and open-ended questions avoided), you can guarantee that all possible responses are included on the questions.

You should avoid at all cost the tendency to read more into the results of qualitative research than is really there. Because focus group results are based on the opinions of very few people, they are not projectable to the target universe. Results of such research are perfectly adequate for defining the issues and pretesting the questionnaire, but only for these purposes. Rarely, if ever, are qualitative research findings reliable in and of themselves for making marketing decisions.

“Projectable or probability quantitative survey research yields results that can be projected to the target universe with a known precision. The three types of probability survey are mail, telephone, and personal (or in-home) surveys.”

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research usually leads into a quantitative research phase. Quantitative research can be divided into two categories: projectable research (called “probability research” from here on) and nonprojectable quantitative research. As the name implies, probability research results can be projected to the target universe with known precision. Because nonprojectable research is conducted with a convenience sample instead of a random “probability” sample of the target universe, you can’t generalize from the numerical results.

One type of nonprojectable quantitative research is carried on at a central site. “Mall intercepts” comprise the most common type of central site research. Market research companies are now in many regional shopping centers across the United States. The companies contract to conduct surveys among shoppers in the shopping center. Trained interviewers recruit and screen potential respondents in the public mall areas—not in the stores. Short surveys may be conducted on the mall floor. For longer interviews, the respondents are taken to an interview room. As opposed to focus group research, nonprojectable quantitative research can yield actionable marketing information. For example, suppose your admissions staff had ideas for two different brochures directed to the parents of potential students. With mall-intercept research, the most effective of the two brochures could be reliably determined with minimal expense. Of all the adults approached in the mall, only those with college-bound high school students would be interviewed. Qualified respondents would be asked to rate each brochure separately and then to pick their favorite. (Half would be shown brochure A first, half would be shown B first to control for what is called “ordering effects,” a reaction based on the order in which people encounter things.)

These results would be sufficiently valid for selecting the most effective brochure. It may even be desirable to find the “best” brochure for different cities, e.g., brochure A may be better in Denver, while B may work better in Miami. Central site research has several advantages over other types of quantitative research: (1) it can be completed in a relatively short time; (2) it is relatively inexpensive (provided that the screening criteria are not too restrictive); (3) visual props can be easily employed, in contrast to mail and telephone surveys; (4) large amounts of information can be collected; and (5) complex questionnaires with involved skip patterns can be used because the respondent does not have to contend with following the questionnaire.

As in qualitative research, one must avoid reading too much into nonprojectable quantitative research. While adequate for answering many controlled experimental questions— as in the above example—results may not reflect the views of the target universe on sensitive issues.

Projectable or probability quantitative survey research yields results that can be projected to the target universe with a known precision. The three types of probability survey are mail, telephone, and personal (or in-home) surveys.

Each type has particular advantages and disadvantages, usually involving project cost, turnaround time, potential biases, and data volume capacity. For any given project, the constraints of the situation usually mandate one of the three

techniques. Before examining each technique in detail, let us briefly examine sampling and questionnaire design.

SAMPLING

The device that makes projectability possible is proper sampling. The purpose of sampling is to obtain information that is representative of a universe while examining only a portion of that universe. You should carefully target the universes to be studied. Don't sample the general public if your purpose would be better served by a survey of opinion leaders or of parents of students. Some other likely targets: alumni, faculty, students, prospective students, those who applied to your institution but attended another, school counselors, legislators, donors, and media "gatekeepers."

Compared with taking a census, sampling has several advantages: (1) it is significantly less expensive; (2) it is faster; (3) it is more accurate (paradoxically); and (4) it allows time to collect more in-depth information.

Sampling has two disadvantages. First, information is not collected on everyone. (Sampling could not be used to calculate electric bills.) Second, sampling "error" is introduced. Sampling error arises because not everyone is measured; it is the price paid for using a sample. However, the size of this sampling error, which depends upon the sample size, is known; it is referred to as the "precision" in table 1.

Table 1. Choosing Adequate Sample Size

Total Size of Group Studied (Universe)	*Sample Size Required* Plus or minus 5% Precision	Plus or minus 10% Precision
100	79	49
500	217	81
1,000	278	88
5,000	357	94
10,000	370	95
50,000	381	96
100,000 plus	384	96

NOTE: See text for discussion of the tradeoffs between sample size and response rates.

In most cases, proper sampling means simple random sampling. That is, every member of the target universe has a known and equal chance of being included in the survey sample. In practice, systematic sampling is an adequate substitute for simple random sampling.

Systematic sampling is also known as nth name sampling because the total universe (i.e., population) size is divided by the desired sample size to yield the increment, or n, to be used. For example, if you want a sample of 400 from a universe of 4,000, you will need to sample every 10th person. But don't start automatically with one and go to 10. From a random number table (or by drawing numbers from a hat), select a random number between 1 and n inclusive, which is 10 in this case. Let's assume that number is six. From a list of the universe, select—or have your computer select—the person corresponding to this random number—the sixth person—as the first member of the sample. Subsequently, select sample members by taking the nth (10th in this case) name from the first selected name.

The precision of the results is determined by the size of the sample and the size of the universe. Table 1 is a guide for determining adequate sample sizes.

Table 1 is based upon a 95 percent "confidence level." That is, the sample size is calculated to ensure that the true universe value of a measured variable is within the range "measured value plus or minus precision" 95 percent of the time. Suppose you conduct a survey using a sample of 370 from a universe of 10,000 alumni, and find that 80 percent of your sample would recommend your institution

> "Don't sample the general public if your purpose would be better served by a survey of opinion leaders or of parents of students."

to a college bound student. You could be confident that, 95 times out of 100 times, from 75 to 85 percent of the entire universe holds this opinion. In doing surveys for your institution, you would probably want to hold the precision level at plus or minus 5 percent.

Please note that you need the number of responses listed in the table. You must also remember that you should generally get at least a 50 percent response rate to your survey. That means you would have to double the sample size shown on the table to determine the number of questionnaires that you would send. (Both factors are vital: the sample size and the response rate. For a universe of 10,000, you would need to send out 750 questionnaires, assuming a 50 percent response rate, to get a sample of 370. You couldn't send out 1,480 questionnaires and be satisfied with a 25 percent response rate, even though you would receive 370 completed responses.)

If you need to make statements about subgroups of the sample with precision equal to that of the sample as a whole, the sample size for each subgroup must be determined separately from table 1. In effect, a separate survey is conducted for each subgroup. This is called stratified random sampling. When the survey results are being processed by computer, care must be taken to weight each subgroup back to its proportionate size in the universe at large. You will need some expert help from your computer people on this.

If the response rate is too low, a significant potential for error is introduced. The error is called nonresponse bias. If 70 percent of the sample does not respond to the survey (i.e., a 30 percent response rate), there could be something about the 70 percent that makes it different from the 30 percent that responded. For example, suppose a survey on gun control was mailed to a random sample of the United States population. Suppose further that people opposed to gun control do not like to answer surveys. The results would indicate much stronger support for gun control than really exists in the population as a whole, because the nonrespondents as a group were more opposed to control than those who responded.

If you are familiar with the universe being surveyed and it is relatively homogeneous, a 40 to 45 percent response rate is adequate, provided that the demographics of the respondents match known demographics of the universe. If there is any uncertainty about the overall mix of your universe, you should aim for a response rate of 65 percent or more. You can achieve a response rate of this magnitude cost effectively by careful application of the techniques described by Dillman in *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method.*

> "The objective of questionnaire design is to develop a questionnaire that will reliably collect the needed information without deterring or offending respondents."

QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

Along with sampling, questionnaire design is a most important consideration in conducting a survey. The objective of questionnaire design is to develop a questionnaire that will reliably collect the needed information without deterring or offending respondents.

Parsimony should be a guiding rule in developing a survey. Ask no unnecessary questions; the respondent's time is valuable. By wasting it, you risk reducing your response rate. For each question suggested for a survey, you should ask: "Is there some action I can take based on the answer to this question?" If the answer is no, omit the question.

Question wording is more an art than a science. Common sense is your best guide. An excellent reference for writing questionnaires is Payne, *The Art of Asking Questions.* In Chapter 14, "A Concise Check List of 100 Considerations," he gives many tips, including the following:

- use simple words
- keep it short
- do not talk down to respondents
- avoid objectionable questions
- do not be vague
- be specific
- avoid bias
- do not be overly specific

- avoid hypothetical questions
- use words that will be uniformly understood
- avoid double negatives
- use mutually exclusive response choices
- do not assume too much knowledge by the respondent
- provide time referrents if necessary
- do not ask two questions at once
- do not use abbreviations or unconventional words and phrases
- make sure that information in questions is technically correct
- try to use questions comparable with existing data

Use fixed-choice responses in every possible situation; avoid open-ended questions as much as possible. The response choices should be exhaustive and mutually exclusive (focus group information and pretesting are useful here). Scaled-question responses 1 to 5 should be anchored on each end with a descriptive phrase (in this case the anchors could be "very important" for 1 and "very unimportant" for 5). Intermediate scale points may or may not be anchored, but there should be a neutral center point.

On mail surveys or any self-administered survey, avoid complex skip patterns. They tend to confuse the respondent and can lead to lower response rates. Order questions according to their importance in terms of the survey's goals, with the most important first. Group questions similar in content together. Order content groups along some line of logical linkage if possible. Within a content area, position more objectionable questions toward the end of that section. Place demographic questions at the end of the questionnaire.

With careful planning, you can minimize the cost of entering your survey's data onto computers. The choice codes the respondents mark can be the codes punched into the computer. For example, mail survey respondents could be instructed to circle the number corresponding to their response, with the responses printed as YES...1 NO...2, etc. The 1's and 2's, as marked by the respondents, would be punched into the computer.

If possible, the data number and column position should be unobtrusively placed beside each question in small type (or beside every 8th or 10th question is adequate). Again, though, keep your focus on the respondent. If precoding is likely to confuse or deter the respondent, don't do it—hand code the completed questionnaires.

Precoding can be done with all types of questionnaires. A questionnaire administered by an interviewer can carry more detailed precoding because the respondent never sees it. But keep precoding unobtrusive on self-administered questionnaires. Be sure to seek the advice of those who will perform the data entry and computer tabulation for general coding guidelines and for answers to any specific questions.

MAIL, TELEPHONE, AND INTERVIEW SURVEYS

Mail surveys. Let's start out by examining in detail mail surveying. Perhaps the biggest advantage of a mail survey is cost. Despite the unrelenting increase in stamp costs, mail remains the cheapest way to administer a questionnaire. Mail surveys have other virtues, too. They are delivered into neighborhoods that interviewers may be hesitant to enter.

The questionnaires may be answered by any specified member of the family at a time convenient for the respondent. Also, respondents often answer questions by mail that would otherwise be embarrassing to them.

The chief shortcoming of mail surveys is the possibility of nonresponse bias, as mentioned above, because of a low response rate. Some subgroups of the sample might not be as likely to respond as others. For example, middle-aged white women could be greatly overrepresented, while young black men might not be represented

"Despite the unrelenting increase in stamp costs, mail remains the cheapest way to administer a questionnaire."

at all.

You can use follow-up mailings and incentives to avoid a low response rate. Typically, you should send a reminder about three days after the questionnaire mailing. Then send a second questionnaire mailing two weeks later.

Small monetary incentives help boost response by making the addressee feel obligated to you. Other gifts, such as calculators or books, can be equally effective. As a representative of a college, you may consider this inappropriate. So consider a concert ticket or even a football schedule. Good cover letters, first-class outgoing postage (stamps are better than metering or indicias), and postpaid reply envelopes also result in higher response rates.

Telephone surveys. Surprisingly enough, you can use rather complex questionnaires and collect large volumes of data by telephone. Most people will consent to interviews of one-half hour and even, longer, providing you catch and hold their interest.

The chief strength of telephone surveys, though, is speedy delivery of results. You can have information in hand within hours after completing calls.

Personal interview surveys. In theory, at least, the personal interview survey is not subject to nonresponse bias. The response rate can be 100 percent. Actually, it isn't. Interviewers do not find people at home, or they purposefully avoid unpleasant neighborhoods. Even so, true response rates in excess of 80 percent are not uncommon.

Personal interviews also permit use of long, detailed questionnaires and follow-up questioning where needed. The interviewers can explain questions if necessary. Sessions lasting for an hour or even longer are not unusual. Visual props may be used, and the interviewer has an opportunity to explain anything that may confuse the respondent.

> "On the negative side, an unskilled interviewer may affect the nature of the response by unintentionally cuing the respondent with his or her opinions."

On the negative side, an unskilled interviewer may affect the nature of the response by unintentionally cuing the respondent with his or her opinions. Cues can take such forms as tone of voice, inflection, facial expression, or leading probes. In addition, respondents may be reluctant to answer sensitive or embarrassing questions in the presence of a stranger.

Cost is, by far, the chief drawback in this type of survey. One can easily spend $100,000 or more on a relatively simple project.

Dickinson College greatly reduced survey costs by having a group of trained student interviewers on campus. The students, who had been trained and used by a national polling organization in connection with the Three Mile Island incident, volunteered their services. Few institutions are that fortunate.

Table 2 summarizes the major advantages and disadvantages of the various types of quantitative research.

Table 2. Comparison of Four Quantitative Survey Methods adapted from Kress, 1982, p. 108)

Criteria	Mail	Tele-phone	In-Home	Central Site*
Handling complex questionnaires	P	G	E	E
Collecting large amounts of data	G	G	E	E
Collecting "sensitive" information	G	F	F	F
Using visual props	F	P	E	E
Controlling interviewer effects	E	F	P	P
Controlling sampling	F	G	E	n/a
Time required to complete project	P	E	F	E
Typical response rates	F	F	F	n/a
Cost	G	G	P	G

* Key: E-Excellent G-Good F-Fair P-Poor
n/a-not applicable

MANAGING THE PROJECT

Good management of the survey guarantees not only timely completion of the research project but that you will keep the price down. Early on, prepare a schedule with the major project milestones. These milestones include: the problem definition or goal, draft questionnaire, final questionnaire, sample specification, mail date or date to begin field work, cut-off date, data entry completion, tabulation completion, draft report, final report, and implementation plan.

The schedule should be realistic; good research takes time. If you need fast results, use a faster research technique such as telephone; don't try to hurry a slow technique like mail. Once a schedule has been agreed to by all parties involved, stay on it.

Good quality control in any type of market research is mandatory. Even a seemingly small error, such as a typo on the questionnaire sample group key, can completely invalidate all of the results of a very expensive project. Check and double check each step along the way. Use the milestone schedule as a check list. If any step feels the least bit loose, revise your procedures to tighten it up. Maintain an abiding faith in Murphy's law: if anything can go wrong, it will.

Set up a system for handling and controlling completed questionnaires. Scan each one for obvious errors. When tracking individual respondents, log responses by day. Initiate additional mailing waves or telephone call-backs as necessary to control the response rate. Number all completed questionnaires and enter that number as part of the computer data.

Prepare an extremely explicit and complete set of coding instructions, even if you are coding the responses yourself. Code replies to open-ended questions based on a content analysis of the actual responses. (Again, avoid open-ended questions whenever possible.) The coding instructions should include several samples of coded questionnaires.

The next step is getting the data directly into the computer. This is best done by an in-house data entry department or a commercial data entry house. If at all possible, the project budget should include funds for key verification of the data. (Key verification is a second keyboarding of the data wherein the original data is checked character by character.)

The preliminary computer runs should be "cleaning" runs looking for incorrect or illogical responses. All suspect responses should be checked against the source questionnaire. Several incorrect responses on one questionnaire probably indicate an insincere respondent; that case should be deleted from the analysis. If you used stratified sampling, responses will probably have to be weighted to represent their proper proportion within the universe.

Once the data have been cleaned, the computer tabulation can begin. The purpose of the tabulation is to tease from the collected data the information that addresses the research questions, and any unanticipated useful information. Statistics are a means to this end, not an end in themselves. Most colleges and universities have access to statistical packages such as SPSS or SAS. These or similar statistical packages are mandatory for performing the necessary tabulations, but they can be a little difficult to use. For the tabulation, you should seek the assistance of an experienced market research faculty member and your computer center.

Statistical techniques typically employed are frequencies, averages, cross-tabulation, breakdown, analysis of variance, regression analysis, and more complex segmentation techniques such as factor, discriminate, and cluster analyses.

Always prepare a final report, and present it in clear, nontechnical language. Major findings and recommendations should be up front, on page one of the report. Be careful that personal biases do not creep into reports. Avoid "bad news only" reports, too. The research data almost always suggest remedies for problems; these should be included along with the bad news. In short, the report should be an action document, not a scholarly paper.

It must be complete, however. Include details on the sampling methods employed, response rates, mailing or interview schedules, and demographic breakdown.

Planning at the outset and implementation of results at the end are both

“Even a seemingly small error, such as a typo on the questionnaire sample group key, can completely invalidate all of the results of a very expensive project.”

critical to the success of market research. The more detailed the plan, the more likely you are to get usable results at an acceptable cost.

Implementation is the most important step of the entire process, but it sometimes does not happen. For one reason or another, the final report gets filed away and never fully used. Market research is perishable; if it isn't acted upon immediately, it becomes dated.

Market research is also on-going. You should conduct follow-up research to ascertain whether actions taken as a result of the original study did, indeed, solve the problems. Market research is an integral part of marketing; make it a way of life—not just an event.

> "The more detailed the plan, the more likely you are to get usable results at an acceptable cost."

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> “You should conduct follow-up research to ascertain whether actions taken as a result of the original study did, indeed, solve the problems.”

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